

12th November 2023 – Remembrance Sunday Reflection: Micah 4 & 5 ‘The Prince of Shalom’

I recently read Robert Harris’ novel ‘Munich’. It’s a brilliant book, absolutely gripping even though we all know the ending, and a remarkably sympathetic portrayal of Neville Chamberlain as he desperately tries to resolve an impossible situation and negotiate a peace – a peace which, in words he must have regretted almost as soon as he said them, was not ‘for our time,’ but only for another year at most.

As we look in horror at our news screens every night – and increasingly many of us can’t face doing that anymore – I suspect many of us might feel also a bit more sympathy for Prime Minister Chamberlain. **Hard as anyone tries to bring peace, it only ever seems temporary. There is, it seems, no peace for our time**, only a temporary respite, as the horrifying, largely self-defeating, litany of violence continues to resound around the world, in numerous conflicts, some of which have lasted decades; as powerful, angry, old men continue to fight the same battles they fought as young men, only succeeding in dragging new generations, even whole societies, into their darkness.

I’m sure I’m not the only one who, as I’ve prepared this week for Remembrance Sunday, has wondered why we gather like this every year, when the storm clouds of war seem as near as ever. Important as it is to remember, I imagine many of us are wondering: has humanity ever really learnt anything from the past?

And as I reflected on what to say today that was of any value whatsoever, I was reminded of two things – two things that do give me hope, that bring me back to why we do this every year. And the first is this: **our definition of peace is too small**. So often we reduce ‘peace’ to its lowest baseline, the absence of conflict, or to some vague feeling of the absence of inner turmoil.

But **scripture’s definition of peace is so much bigger**. The word is *shalom* and it means complete wellbeing, wholeness, integration and restoration on every level and in every dimension. It’s a big word. In fact, it’s the last word of our reading – ‘and he will be our peace,’ our *shalom*.

This shalom stretches far beyond beating swords into ploughs and spears into pruning hooks. The vision of Micah that precedes it describes many nations not just avoiding conflict but streaming to the mountain of the Lord, to be taught the Lord’s ways and walk in his paths. It is not just the absence of war or a calm feeling, it is a communal lifestyle of peace, the reconciliation of all things.

This kind of language was unheard of in the literature of the day. Religion was mostly a whole lot of little, local gods all vying with each other – war was about determining who had the biggest god. And into this cycle of perpetual violence and retribution, which, tragically, for all our supposed sophistication, we still see around the world now, the prophet Micah speaks revolution. Imagine a world, he declares, where shalom is available to all nations, where this God of shalom, Yahweh, is for everyone – the whole world and not just for one nation or race or language.

It is *this* peace that we pray for when we pray our prayers every Remembrance Sunday – a peace which goes beyond the temporary resolution of conflict to the restoration of all things; that goes beyond just turning swords into ploughs but into learning the ways of the God of peace and walking daily in those paths. **Today I choose to remember the promise of shalom – a peace to which the people of all nations are invited.**

But how do we get there? Or to reduce the problem to its essence, how do we solve the problem of the human heart? We might want to walk in the ways of peace, but actually doing that is another thing altogether. To answer that question, I've deliberately spliced together two passages which usually belong in different seasons. Traditionally, we read Micah 4 on Remembrance Sunday and Micah 5 at Christmas Carol Services – 'but you Bethlehem... out of you will come a ruler.' And then we sing 'O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.' But Micah 4 and Micah 5 are *one* prophecy, they were written together – they were never meant to be split up. *Micah 5 answers the question posed by Micah 4* – how will many nations stream to the mountain of the Lord? After all, **a global vision needs a global solution: a global rescuer, one whose greatness stretches beyond his nation to the ends of the earth**, as the passage says.

Deep down, we all know the peace that we long for in this world – that true *shalom* – is elusive if it's just about human effort, no matter how energetic and well-intentioned. It needs something, or Someone, to make that happen. And reading chapter 4 today without chapter 5 is like building a beautiful car and forgetting to provide the key for the ignition; like presenting a breathtaking landscape at a bay window and forgetting to unlock the door so we can go out into it.

The path to shalom is only opened by the Prince of Shalom, the Prince of Peace, the one born in Bethlehem. In the church calendar, the question posed by Remembrance Sunday only begins to be answered two or three weeks later, when Advent begins.

Today, I choose to remember the Prince of Shalom. And, as we gather, we are all invited by this one, unified vision of Micah to lift our eyes again to see a bigger vision of peace, and ultimately to see the One who alone can change a human heart, who can bring true shalom to the world.

We will still go home to our news screens and our quiet worries. But there is hope, there remains a promise that will one day come to pass, when this Prince of Peace stands and shepherds all of his global flock in the strength of the Lord. And we will all live securely; and He will be our peace. Amen.